

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROVISIONAL IDENTITY?

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Collectors of British Perfins are faced with a prospect of well over 23,000 different dies with only maybe 35% of them having any form of positive identification of the user. For many of the currently unidentified dies new confirming identities will continue to appear but there will always be a hard core of dies for which no confirming identity can be made as either the die is scarce or simply the user did not use their name on their stationery. For some of these unidentified dies provisional identities can be made based on cancellation, period of use and letter combination and recently more and more provisional identities are being made by members searching through early trade directories. However, great care needs to be made in making a provisional identification and relying on only the letter combination of the die is simply not sufficient. Once a provisional identity is made and published it tends to stick so every effort should be made before publication to ensure that the identity is as sound as possible.

In going through the Tomkins catalogues a number of provisional identities which were based on insufficient knowledge, and at best guesses, in early years are apparent. S3200.01, S.G.H.S, was ascribed for many years to the Seaman's Greenwich Hospital Society and thus should have been found with East London cancellations but known copies all had West and South West London cancellations. Now we know that a much more likely user of this die is St.George's of Hanover Square. C0150.01, C.A.E.S, is still linked with the Church Army Evangelical Society which as far as I can determine didn't exist at the time of use of the die. C0910.01. C/B.R.P, was shown as Cork & Black Rock Passage Railway but is now thought to have been used by the Commercial Bank of the River Plate. And there are many, many other examples.

So what makes a good provisional identity? I would propose that the following four criteria must be met before provisional status is granted.

- Cancellations on the stamp must agree with the known location(s) of the operation of the company. For London and other major cities that must include knowledge of the postal district. Simple knowledge that the stamp was used in London is clearly insufficient.

- 2. The company or organisation must have been in operation at the date of use of the perfin die. For example a die such as R0080.01, R.A.C, cannot be the Royal Automobile Club when it is known on penny reds.
- 3. The letter combination must agree exactly with the manner in which the company or organisation was known at the time. Many companies changed their names or became incorporated and in most instances the companies would change their perfin to match.
- 4. There must be at least three matching letters or matching letter combinations in the die. Combination letters such as Ltd, Co, Bros, Son etc should only count as a single letter match. Provisional identities of single letter dies or dies such as 'S&S' or 'B&C^o' are therefore not possible.

All four of these rules should be met before a provisional identity can be given. Anything less is only a "possible" not a "probable" identity and as such should not be catalogued. Other pointers though can also be used to help reinforce the provisional such as:-

- The company was a known user of other perfin dies.
- The company was a known user of underprints, receipt stamps or advertising circulars on early postal stationery.
- The company was a large company - large companies are more likely to be perfin users.
- Cancellations are consistent with the business of the company such as 'NPB' being associated with companies distributing circulars and newspapers.
- Usage stopped at the same time as the firm ceased to trade.
- The firm is a recorded user in the known lists of Allchin, Sloper etc.

If the simple set of four rules are kept then inspired guesses can be kept out of the Tomkins catalogue in future and at the same time a number of good provisional identities can be added to the listings.